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History May Not Repeat Itself For Pakistan

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Abstract

Pakistan is currently facing a serious political crisis. It has many dimensions – economic, political, and extremism inside and outside its western borders. It is the rise of extremism that poses an existential threat to the country. In fact, the Pakistani society is at war with itself with extremist elements challenging the writ of the state. To deal with the growing extremist threat will need progress on the economic and political fronts. That said, there is some expectation that history will not repeat itself with another military intervention that happened on several occasions in the past. Some counter forces – an independent media, a rising middle-class and civil society institutions – are likely to prevent the collapse of the Pakistani state.

Pakistan's history may not repeat itself this time around. The military may not intervene in politics as it did in the past whenever it felt that the country was moving on the wrong track. What the country is witnessing this time in terms of social and political instability and economic distress has no precedence in history. Yet in the past, lesser turbulence was reason enough for the military to step in to 'save the country'. This happened four times in the country's turbulent past.

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In 1958, General Ayub Khan, the Commander-in-Chief of the army, was convinced that the frequent changes in the government with a new prime minister being sworn in every few months justified the staging of a coup d'état. He threw the civilians out and established a military government that ruled for almost eleven years. In 1969, General Yahya Khan, the army's Commander-in-Chief, thought that a popular campaign against the government of Ayub Khan prompted by an increase in the price of sugar was a good enough reason to stage another coup d'état and assume the presidency for himself. He ruled for almost three years and saw the breakup of Pakistan with the province of East Pakistan gaining independence as Bangladesh after a bitterly fought civil war.

In 1977, unhappiness with the alleged rigging of the elections held that year by the civilian government headed by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto brought large number of people out in the streets and the military was back in power, this time under General Zia ul-Haq. The General also governed as President for eleven years. He was replaced by a series of civilian governments – seven of them, counting the interim governments that were in office to prepare the country for repeated general elections – after his death in an unexplained aircraft crash. The civilians attempted to sideline the military but did not fully succeed. It was one of these attempts – by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif when he tried to replace the army chief of staff, General Pervez Musharraf – that led to another spell of military rule. President Musharraf governed for almost nine years.

In January 2011, Pakistan faces an existential threat even greater than the one it had to deal with after it lost its eastern 'wing' in December 1971. The government and the society has been challenged by several extremist groups whose declared objective is to establish an Islamic order in the country that embraces all aspects of life – the economy, the legal and political systems, relations with the outside world. The economy is in deep trouble and is unlikely to grow at a rate higher than the rate of growth in population. This will mean adding perhaps as many as 10 million people to the already large pool of poverty. Most of the new poor will be in the urban areas, to which belonged the assassin of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer. They will be willing recruits to the extremist cause if the economy cannot find productive jobs for them.

The political structure is still in the process of being erected. Two days before Taseer was gunned down in Islamabad, the government headed by Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani lost its working majority in the national assembly. This means that it can be brought down anytime the opposition is able to settle its own differences and move a vote of no-confidence against the prime minister. Economics once again was the immediate cause of the government's predicament. It is obliged to reform the tax revenue system if it wishes to receive a large tranche release from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF wants Islamabad to introduce what is effectively a value-added tax in order to increase the pitifully low tax-to-GDP ratio. This

is not supported by the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), the only political party that has a strong urban and middle-class base. The party considers a value-added tax to be a burden on the urban poor and the urban middle classes. Instead, it wants a tax structure that does not have the loopholes through which the rich can walk out with impunity. It wants the government to cut down on its own expenditure, much of which it regards as wasteful. It is troubled by the seeming increase in corruption.

Of all the many problems the country faces at this time, none poses a greater threat than extremism. For many who subscribe to the ideology espoused by the people who have gone to the extreme of the society, taking innocent lives through acts of terrorism is a legitimate device for achieving their goals. Any serious attempt to interfere with their campaign can result in heavy losses, including the cold-blooded murder of those who challenge their ways. This is the reason why Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab, the country's largest and most prosperous province, was gunned down by his own guard in a public place. The guard voluntarily surrendered himself and his weapon to the police after the killing with the chilling statement that he had achieved his mission. What is very troubling for the more moderate segments of the society is not only this political assassination, but the fact that it was endorsed by 500 religious leaders who issued a statement after the governor's killing, approving the act. Whether the mission was really achieved will remain a question hanging over Pakistan for as long as the will of the majority does not prevail over the very small minority who are prepared to use extreme measures to exert their influence.

To this interplay between rising extremism, poorly performing economy and a political system still working to find its feet, must be added the problem in the country's western border where the Taliban are aiding the non-government groups fighting the United States (US) in Afghanistan. Washington would like to see Islamabad show greater resolve to eliminate the sanctuaries in its tribal areas from which these groups operate. The use of unmanned drone aircrafts by the US to kill the Taliban leaders has also resulted in the deaths of many civilians living in the area. This has caused enormous resentment against the Americans in the country and is adding to the popular support of Islamic militancy.

If one were to trace the cause and effect of Pakistan's current predicament, which development would be placed first? Should we consider the failure of the economy the cause for the rise of extremism? Is it extremism that is hurting the economy? Is the aggressive posture adopted by the Obama administration in the Afghan war giving the extremists the platform from which to operate? Historians will debate these questions for a long time. What is clear, though, is that Pakistan at this time is moving through a perfect storm. The military appears to have concluded that changing the commander of the ship would not help to navigate it towards the safety offered by the shore. What is needed is a concerted effort that involves all major groups in the

society. For them to work together would require a system where their differences can be resolved. This cannot be done by the military, but has to be the responsibility of a parliament that has the elected representatives of the people, a press that watches over the working of the government, and civil society institutions that represent well defined public interests. All these are present in the country and are gaining confidence and experience. Time is on their side.

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